

April 2002

**W**e have been very busy indeed over the past few months.

The number of issues on which we are fighting simultaneously continues to increase. We have had some good news, but there are also issues of very great concern.

The Government review of the law on cannabis is particularly worrying. There is also the Whitehall review on possible civil partnership rights for homosexuals and unmarried cohabitants.

### **Crunch vote on gay and cohabiting couple adoption**

David Hinchliffe and other back-bench MPs have put down an amendment to the Adoption and Children Bill to legalise adoption by homosexuals and cohabiting heterosexual couples. Two prominent Liberal Democrat MPs have also put down a similar amendment.

This vote has now been delayed until later in April.

The Government says it may be better for the issue to be considered as part of its civil partnerships review.

A Commons vote would be an important test of the opinions of MPs. A significant vote in favour would put pressure on the Government to change the law, even if it does not happen in the current Bill.

The Conservative Party have announced they are against any change to the present law whereby only married couples can jointly adopt.

### **Teachers' Codes substantially revised**

Following a nine month campaign by The Christian Institute, the General Teaching Councils in Wales and England have both decided to make substantial changes to their professional codes. The draft code for England would have required teachers to fully respect differences of religious belief or sexual orientation. This could clearly have been used against Christian teachers who believe that homosexual practice is morally wrong. We had a helpful meeting with GTC officials and are pleased that the Draft Code has been amended and downgraded to have only advisory rather than mandatory status. The Welsh code was toned down to such an extent that we issued a press release welcoming the new version.

### **Transsexual loses court case against Church**

In one of the first cases of its kind a church was sued by a transsexual man who wanted to force the church to accept him as a woman. Bill Parry, a married father of three and former congregationalist minister, recently had a sex-change operation and now calls himself Dian. He sued Rev Alex Ashton's Church in Maesteg for the right to attend the ladies prayer meeting and the right to use the ladies lavatories.

We were very relieved when a Cardiff Judge threw out the case. He ruled that Mr Parry had no legal basis to bring the case. Permission to appeal to the High Court was refused. The judge ordered Mr Parry to pay most of the legal costs, leaving only £500 for the church to pay. We made a gift of £500 to the church to cover these costs, in recognition of their courageous stand.

### **News in brief**

- Crunch vote on gay and cohabiting couple adoption
- Teachers' codes substantially revised.
- Transsexual loses court case against Church
- Institute caught up in backlash against faith schools
- Growing pressure for softening of cannabis law
- Government reviews rights for gay and cohabiting couples
- Hundreds object in NI smacking ban consultation
- CI holds seminars for Christian organisations over new EU Employment Directive
- Scottish Executive's under 3 smacking ban legislation expected soon

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# Easter news

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## **Institute caught up in backlash against faith schools**

An unprecedented attack on Christian schools erupted in March. Emmanuel College in Gateshead, a City Technology College with a Christian ethos, allowed a Christian group to hire the premises for a day conference on Creation. Professor Richard Dawkins attacked the College, for what he claimed they were teaching. There was a considerable amount of misrepresentation in the reporting but during Prime Minister's Questions, Tony Blair pointed out that the school had excellent examination results. The attacks were clearly part of a wider attempt to undermine faith-based schools. The Christian Institute was also criticised for encouraging Christians to become school governors.

## **Growing pressure for softening of cannabis law**

The campaign to decriminalise cannabis is growing relentlessly. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has backed Government proposals to downgrade cannabis to a class 'C' drug, making possession of cannabis no longer an arrestable offence. It is argued this will free police to focus on hard drugs and dealers. The Home Secretary is likely to announce his final decision in the summer, after looking at the findings of the Home Affairs Select Committee and the approach to cannabis piloted in Brixton. Initial evidence from Brixton seems to confirm that, in fact, going soft on cannabis simply encourages dealing in cannabis and harder drugs.

## **Government reviews rights for homosexual and cohabiting couples**

The Government is actively reviewing the financial and administrative implications of giving the legal and financial benefits of marriage to

unmarried heterosexual and gay couples. This follows pressure created by Lord Lester's Civil Partnerships Bill in January. Although that Bill was dropped, the government review now poses a serious threat to the legal status of marriage. The Government may, however, be deterred by the considerable cost of giving benefits to unmarried couples. Our briefing on this issue, *Counterfeit Marriage*, has been widely distributed.

## **Hundreds object in Northern Ireland smacking ban consultation**

The Northern Ireland Executive has carried out a consultation on smacking. Proposals in the consultation included criminalising all parental smacking. We wrote to supporters in the Province, briefing them on the proposals and urging them to write. We understand that hundreds have written. Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly voted in support of a motion by Dr Esmond Bernie drawing attention to the fact that the British Government decided that the current law did not need changing. The NI Executive wrongly claims that the law has to change to comply with the European Court of Human Rights.

## **CI holds seminars for Christian organisations over new EU Employment Directive**

The Institute held seminars during March in London and Newcastle on the EU Employment Directive. The seminars, for Christian organisations, were used to explain the implications of the Directive.

The new laws, due to take effect in December 2003, will have a major impact on Christian organisations. The Directive will remove the freedom of churches and religious organisations to require all employees to be Christians.

Churches will still have the right to appoint a Christian Minister. However, if a church reserves other posts for fellow believers, such as the job of Minister's secretary, it may face a legal challenge. A great deal depends on how widely the government frames the exceptions to the new laws. The Directive allows exceptions to protect an employer's religious ethos. We are fighting to ensure that religious groups get the widest possible scope for protecting themselves from the new laws.

## **Legislation on Scottish Executive's under three smacking ban expected soon**

A Bill that will criminalise parents who smack children under three is expected to be published very shortly by the Scottish Executive. The Criminal Justice Bill, which was outlined in the Executive's White Paper earlier this year, is also likely to ban the use of implements in physical punishment, as well as banning child minders from smacking (other than within the child's home). These proposals will confuse and criminalise loving parents and, as one recent high profile case showed, are not necessary to protect children from abuse. We will be strongly campaigning against these proposals.

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